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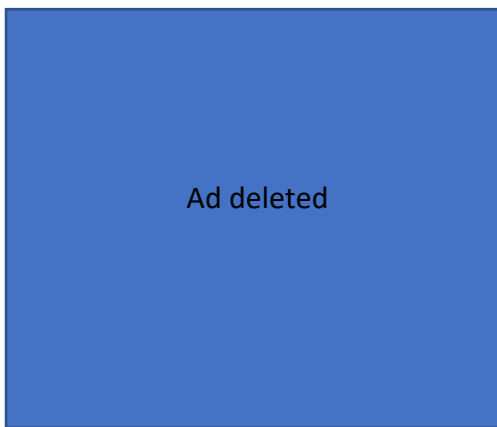
Fault for biased policing also lies in those who call the cops

JUSTIN PHILLIPS COMMENTARY



One resident called police to say they were “uncomfortable” seeing a Black person selling magazines in their neighborhood, despite this not being illegal. Another resident summoned police on a Latino landscaper they didn’t recognize, even though the landscaper wore a shirt bearing the name of the company.

Mill Valley Police Chief Rick Navarro described both incidents during an Oct. 3 City Council meeting in the southern Marin County suburb, as part of a discussion about racially disparate police stops and what can be done about them.



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“I think there’s implicit bias and we need to educate our community” about it, Navarro said. “There’s a lot of work that needs to be done on that front.”

No kidding.

It seems like every year we talk about addressing bias in policing, and we wring our hands whenever new data shows that police around the state continue to profile, stop, search and detain people from marginalized communities, whether they’re Black, brown or transgender. We then rail against law enforcement agencies for failing to change their ways, and local governments for enabling them.

Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Yet in this frustratingly familiar cycle, one guilty party keeps walking away clean:

Us.

If we truly want the police to stop profiling people who are nonwhite and non-cisgender, then the public needs to stop asking them to. Few places offer a better object lesson on taking a look in the mirror than Mill Valley.

The small, scenic enclave is home to roughly 14,100 residents. But it lacks the diversity of nearby Bay Area cities. U.S. Census data shows a scant 1.4% of the population is Black, with only 3.9% of residents being Latino and 5.5% Asian.

Almost 88% percent of residents are white. Based on new police stop data, Mill Valley residents are often suspicious of anyone who isn't.

The Mill Valley Police Department collects statistics about who its officers stop in adherence with the Racial and Identity Profiling Act (RIPA), which requires law enforcement agencies to record the perceived race and ethnicity of people involved in pedestrian and traffic stops.

As Navarro explained on Monday, there were 1,776 such stops between June 1, 2021, and May 31, 2022, 84.2% of them initiated by the officers. Of the officer-initiated stops, Latino people accounted for 16% and Black people 3%. Both percentages are higher than their shares of the city's population. And while officers chose to stop Latinos more than any other nonwhite group, Mill Valley residents called the cops on Black people at 20 times the rate they did white people.

At least that's what an analysis by the Mill Valley Force for Racial Equity and Empowerment, which is comprised of residents appointed by the city, revealed. Latinos didn't escape the community's bias either as residents called police on them at two times the rate they did white people.

Yet, neither Black people nor Latino people are any more likely to be found with contraband than white people. In 66.3% of Black detentions, police let the person go without a citation or arrest. And 54.5% of Latino detentions ended the same way.

Together, Black and Latino folks represent only about 5% of Mill Valley's population. The bias aimed at them isn't rooted in logic. It also isn't unique to Mill Valley.

Popular culture phrases like "BBQ Becky" and "Permit Patty" — used to describe entitled white people who call police on Black folks over petty issues — were born from incidents in Oakland and San Francisco. San Francisco is currently weighing whether to stop its police from initiating low-level traffic stops altogether to address stubborn racial profiling, a move Berkeley made last year and one Oakland made in 2019.

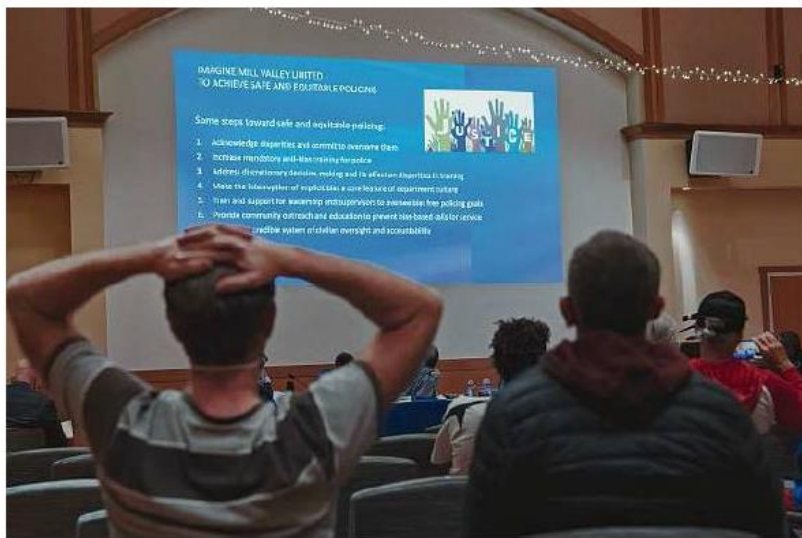
That wasn't up for consideration at Monday's meeting in Mill Valley, which drew roughly two dozen people, including a Black man who told the council he had been stopped by police four times.

“These unconscious negative associations about Black people are rooted in our unique history and experience of enslavement and its legacy,” MVFREE member Celimene Pastor told the council last week. “The deep disparities shown in the Mill Valley RIPA data should be a wakeup call for all of us.”

Yet, most of the comments from city leaders on Monday were how MVFREE’s analysis differed from the Police Department’s analysis. While MVFREE compared the rates of a group stopped by police to their respective portions of Mill Valley’s population — a method recommended by the state RIPA board — the Police Department did not.

Maybe it’s no surprise that current Mill Valley Mayor Jim Wickham, a 37-year veteran of the city’s Police Department, and his three colleagues on the City Council — all of whom happen to be white men — are reluctant to call out the implicit bias in the people who put them in office.

But I don’t think that’s leadership. Do you?



Photos by Michaela Vatcheva/Special to The Chronicle

Celimene Pastor presents an analysis of police stop data at the Mill Valley City Council meeting on Oct. 3. The report revealed residents call the police on Black people at roughly 20 times the rate they do for whites.



Mill Valley police Chief Rick Navarro said the Marin County town, nearly 88% white, has work to do in addressing implicit bias against people of color.